DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 105 HE 017 767

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TITLE The Theory/Practice Gap in Management.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Business; *Business Administration Education; Higher Education; Inservice Teacher Education; *Interprofessional Relationship; Organizational Theories; *Relevance (Education); *School Business Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The gap that exists between the world of management theory and the practice of management was studied. A questionnaire was administered to 192 practicing managers and 104 academics in 1983. The respondents were asked whether they felt a serious gap or difference existed between management theory as taught in business and management schools and colleges, and management as practiced in the real world. A majority of respondents felt a significant gap existed. Practicing managers perceived a greater gap between management theory and the practice of management than did academicians. Approaches to bridge the gap between theory and practice that both managers and academics favored had to do with providing more opportunities for dialogue and interaction between management theorists and practitioners. These approaches included: developing exchange programs and discussions between management educators and practicing managers; developing alternate organizational structures to overcome the shortcomings of the hierarchy and bureaucratic rules in the practice of management; institutionalizing rewards for developing and implementing new ideas and management practices within organizations; and developing more and better executive/professor exchange programs. (SW)

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THE THEORY/PRACTICE GAP IN MANAGEMENT

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THE THEORY/PRACTICE GAP IN MANAGEMENT

Several years ago J. Sterling Livingston, in what has become a classic in management literature, wrote about the "Myth of the Well Educated Manager." In the article, he pointed out that "how effectively a manager will perform on the job cannot be predicted by the number of degrees he holds, the grades he receives in school, or the formal management education programs he attends."

The reasons why? They are two-fold according to Livingston:

(1) formal management programs tend to develop and "train" problem solvers rather than problem finders - a dichotomous contrast with the real world of management where problems must be assessed and dealt with before they reach crisis proportions, and

(2) there is an enormous difference between the world of management theory and the practice of management.

This article and the research that supports its conclusion concern the latter of the above two problems - the gap that exists between management theory and the practice of management.

MANAGEMENT THEORY

The term "theory" is often used by practicing managers to mean the opposite of "fact." In a sense, management theory is often viewed, by practicing managers, as being too speculative. In conversation with practicing managers one often hears, for example, that professors or management theorists are too theoretical, that managers need to be

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practical, or that some new management idea or approach will not work because it is too theoretical. Unfortunately, this is a somewhat distorted and incorrect picture of the relationship between the practice of management and management theory.

THE PRACTICE OF MANAGEMENT

On the other side of the ledger are found management theorists and academics who often contend that practicing managers are too tied to maintenance of the status quo, that they lack the creativity and innovation to experiment with new management ideas and approaches, or that they are too obsolete with respect of the body of knowledge we call management to know what the most current and available management ideas and practices are. Unfortunately this too is also a one-sided, incorrect, and distorted way of looking at the relationship between management theory and the practice of management.

EXPLANATIONS

While the historical and conventional explanations given for the gap between management theory and the practice of management, from both the "practice" and the "theory" camps are often one-sided and provincial, the fact remains that there is in fact a gap between theory and practice in management. The reality is that in some areas of management (such as computer applications and high technology manufacturing environments) the practice of management is far in advance of the theory of management - and, conversely, in other areas of management (areas such as motivation and understanding human behavior at work) management theory far exceeds the application of that which is actually in evidence in the practice

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of management.

The primary challenge and value to be found in assessing the reasons for and the potential impact of such a schism is not in laying the blame on either the theorists or the practitioners but rather in finding mechanisms for bridging the gap and creating a higher level of cooperation between the two groups.

Any hope of achieving such a union between theory and practice in management must of necessity rest, at least in part, on an exploration of and consensus on both the reasons for the schism and recommended procedures or methods for bridging the gap. Hence, the birth of this study.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

In a 1983 survey research questionnaire administered to 472 practicing managers and academics (random samples were taken from ASPA & ASTD membership directories and from the AACSB Faculty Personnel Guide) 296 useable responses were generated. One hundred ninety two of the respondents were practicing managers while 104 of the respondents were academics. Respondents were asked to respond to the following two questions.

MANAGEMENT THEORY & THE PRACTICE OF MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS

QUESTION I: Do you think that a serious gap or difference exists between management theory, as taught in business and management schools and colleges, and management, as practiced in the real world?

_____Yes _____No _____Undecided

QUESTION II: On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning "no serious problem exists" and 10 meaning "a serious problem exists", how would you evaluate this problem? Please place an "X" on the scale below indicating how you

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feel about this issue. Place only one "X" on the scale.

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  1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10
.____.____.____.____.____.____.____.____.____.____.
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No serious problem exists - little difference exists between management theory & the practice of management

A serious problem exists - a substantial gap/schism exists between management theory and the practice of management

The following is a breakdown of the responses to the above two questions:

	PRACTICING MANAGERS	ACADEMICS	TOTAL
YES	175 (91%)	62 (60%)	237 (80%)
NO	14 (7%)	30 (29%)	44 (15%)
UNDECIDED	3 (2%)	12 (11%)	15 (5%)
TOTAL	192 (100%)	104 (100%)	296 (100%)
AVE. SCALE SCORE	8.96	6.57	8.12

It is clear from this response pattern that a majority of the respondents perceive that a significant gap or difference does exist, as perceived by the total respondent sample, between management theory and the practice of management - with 80% indicating "yes" and an average scale score of 8.12 out of a possible 10.00.

Equally, or perhaps more interesting, is the fact that it is apparent that practicing managers perceive a greater gap between management theory and the practice of management, at 91% to 60% and 8.96 to 6.57 respectively, than do academicians.

In an attempt to further understand both the nature of and the solution to the gap between the management theory and the practice of

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management, the respondents were asked to respond to two additional questions:

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

QUESTION III: Over the years there has been a considerable amount of discussion concerning the apparent difference or disparity between "management theory" (what is taught in business and management schools and curriculums) and "the practice of management" (the actual process of management in the "real" world).

Several ideas have been put forth historically to explain such a disparity. On a scale of 1 to 7 please rate the following explanations for the disparity or difference by placing an "X" on each scale with a 1 signifying little importance and a 7 signifying great importance in explaining the difference. Please feel free to add additional ideas not included in the list below under the "other" space provided and rank accordingly.

QUESTION IV: Part A: Given the existence of such a disparity between management theory and the practice of management, what five suggestions would you make to help bridge the gap (please write clearly and list in order of importance).

Part B: The following is a list of additional ideas on how the gap may be bridged. Please add those suggestions that you have made above to this list (do not duplicate ideas) and rank order the entire list with 1 being the least important and practical suggestion for bridging the gap, a 2 the next least important, and so on until each idea has been rank

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ordered.

The rank ordered results of question III in the survey are shown in Table I below, with the higher numbers in the importance score column indicating the most important explanations for the gap in the minds of the respondents and the lower scores indicating the explanations of lesser importance.

TABLE I

REASONS FOR THE GAP BETWEEN MANAGEMENT THEORY AND THE PRACTICE OF MANAGEMENT

Reasons/Explanations	Overall Importance Score	Importance Score For Practicing Managers	Importance Score For Academics
Different goals, values, and priorities held by management educators/theorists and practicing managers.	5.58	5.59	5.56
Inherent resistance to change encountered in organizations by managers who attempt to implement new management methods.	5.41	5.13	5.92
Insufficient opportunities for exchange (i.e., of ideas, experiences, etc.) between management educators/theorists and practicing managers.	5.29	5.42	5.04
Lack of appreciation for the realities and rigors of the practice of management among management educators/ theorists.	5.24	6.52	2.87
Lack of practical experience among management educators/ theorists.	5.05	6.09	3.13

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TABLE I (continued)

Reasons/Explanations	Overall Importance Score	Importance Score For Practicing Managers	Importance Score For Academics
Lack of understanding, comprehension and appreciation for management theory among practicing managers.	4.91	4.11	6.39
Communications and technical vocabulary barriers between practicing managers and management educators/theorists.	4.87	4.82	4.97
Over-reliance on established organizational procedures and practice in the real world of management.	4.70	4.41	5.23
Insufficient organizational incentives (i.e., pay, bonuses, etc.) for developing and implementing new management methods, programs and ideas.	4.30	4.54	3.86
Management theory is too theoretical - not practical and useful enough.	4.27	4.97	2.98
Lack of trust between practicing managers and management educators/ theorists.	4.17	4.18	4.16
Practicing managers simply do not have enough time to keep up with new developments and ideas in management theory.	3.98	3.85	4.21
The practice of management is well ahead of management theory (development wise) in most areas-making the lag time in adoption normal.	3.87	4.51	2.68

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TABLE I (continued)

Reasons/Explanations	Overall Importance Score	Importance Score For Practicing Managers	Importance Score For Academics
Management theory is well ahead of the practice of management (development wise) in most areas-making the lag time in adoption normal.	3.78	3.13	4.97
Time demands-lack of time to implement changes in management practices.	3.47	3.98	2.54
Management theory is too complicated-not simple enough.	3.25	2.88	3.92

As shown above in Table I, the five explanations considered most important by the total population of the survey are:

(1) Different goals, values, and priorities held by management educators/theorists and practicing managers.

(2) Inherent resistance to change encountered in organizations by managers who attempt to implement new management methods.

(3) Insufficient opportunities for exchange (i.e., of ideas, experiences, etc.) between management educators/theorists and practicing managers.

(4) Lack of appreciation for the realities and rigors of the practice of management among management educators/theorists.

(5) Lack of practical experience among management educators/theorists.

Of perhaps more interest than the overall population profile is a comparison of the top seven explanations for the theory/practice gap as perceived by practicing managers and management theorists respectively, as shown below:

COMPARISON OF EXPLANATIONS
FOR THE THEORY/PRACTICE GAP
RANK ORDERED

Practicing Managers	Academicians
1. Lack of appreciation for the realities and rigors of the practice of management among management/educators/ theorists.	1. Lack of understanding, comprehension and appreciation for management theory among practicing managers.
2. Lack of practical experience among management educators/ theorists.	2. Inherent resistance to change encountered in organizations by managers who attempt to implement new management methods.
3. Different goals,values, and priorities held by management educators/theorists and practicing managers.	3. Lack of appreciation for management theory among practicing managers.
4. Insufficient opportunities for exchange (i.e., of ideas, experiences, etc.) between management educators/theorists and practicing managers.	4. Different goals, values, and priorities held by management educators/theorists and practicing managers.
5. Inherent resistance to change encountered in organizations by managers who attempt to implement new management methods.	5. Over-reliance on established organizational procedures and practice in the real world of management.
6. Management theory is too theoretical - not practical and useful enough.	6. Insufficient opportunities for exchange (i.e., of ideas, experiences, etc.) between management educators/ theorists and practicing managers.
7. Communications and technical vocabulary barriers between practicing managers and management educators/ theorists.	7. Communications and technical vocabulary barriers between practicing managers and management educators/theorists.

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Of particular interest in the above comparison is the fact that the following four explanations for the theory/practice gap appear in both lists:

(1) Different goals, values, and priorities held by management educators/theorists and practicing managers.

(2) Inherent resistance to change encountered in organizations by managers who attempt to implement new management methods.

(3) Insufficient opportunities for exchange (i.e., of ideas, experiences, etc.) between management educators/theorists and practicing managers.

(4) Communications and technical vocabulary barriers between practicing managers and management educators/theorists.

The commonality of these two lists suggests strongly that there is at least some agreement between practicing managers and management theorists on the presence of and reasons for the gap between management theory and the practice of management. Other indicators of agreement come from a comparison of the "difference scores" between practicing managers and management theorists as shown below:

COMPARISON OF EXPLANATIONS
FOR THE THEORY/PRACTICE GAP
SMALLEST DIFFERENCE SCORES

	Explanation	Practicing Managers	Management Theorists	Difference
1.	lack of trust between practicing managers and management educators/ theorists.	4.18	4.16	.02
2.	Different goals, values, and priorities held by manage-ment educators/theorists and practicing managers.	5.59	5.56	.03
3.	Communications and technical vocabulary barriers between practicing managers and management educators/theorists.	4.82	4.97	.15

	Explanation	Practicing Managers	Management Theorists	Difference
4.	Practicing managers simply do not have encugh time to keep up with new developments and ideas in management theory.	3.85	4.21	.36
5.	Insufficient opportunities for exchange (i.e., of ideas, experiences, etc.) between management educators/theorists and practicing managers.	5.42	5.04	.38
6.	Insufficient organizational incentives (i.e., pay, bonuses, etc.) for developing and implementing new management methods, programs and ideas.	4.54	3.86	.68
7.	Inherent resistance to change encountered in organizations by managers who attempt to implement new management methods.	5.13	5.92	.79
8.	Over-reliance on established organizational procedures and practice in the real world of management.	4.41	5.23	.82

As indicated above, there are a substantial number of areas of agreement between practicing managers and management theorists as to the reasons for the existance of a gap between theory and practice in management, as indicated by difference scores of less than 1.00 on eight of the variable explanations.

Another interesting comparison is that of the variable explanations of the theory/practice gap with the largest difference scores between

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practicing managers and management theorists. As shown below, there are four variable explanations with "effective" difference scores of over 2.00.

COMPARISON OF EXPLANATIONS
FOR THE THEORY/PRACTICE GAP
LARGEST DIFFERENCE SCORES

Explanation	Practicing Managers	Management Theorists	Difference
1. Lack of appreciation for the realities and rigors of the practice of management among management educators/ theorists.	6.52	2.87	3.65
2. Lack of practical experience among management educators/ theorists.	6.09	3.13	2.96
3. Lack of understanding, comprehension and appreciation for management theory among practicing managers.	4.11	6.39	2.28
4. Management theory is too theoretical - not practical and useful enough.	4.97	2.98	1.99

These results would suggest that while there are many areas of agreement with respect to reasons or explanations for the theory/practice gap there are also areas of substantial disagreement between management theorists and practicing managers.

It should be clear from the results of this study that there is in fact a gap between management theory and the practice of management and that

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there is both agreement and disagreement as to the explanations of or for the gap. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the question of how the theory/practice gap might best be dealt with in a manner designed to bring the theory camp and the practice camp closer together.

SOLUTIONS

The rank ordered results of questions IV, parts A and B, in the survey are shown in Table II below, with the higher numbers in the importance score column indicating the most important suggestions for closing the gap and the lower scores indicating the suggestions of less importance.

TABLE II

SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAYS/METHODS OF BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN MANAGEMENT THEORY AND THE PRACTICE OF MANAGEMENT

Suggestions/Recommendations	Overall Importance Score	Importance Score For Practicing Managers	Importance Score For Academics
1. Developing exchange programs and rap sessions and other forms of dialogue between management educators and practicing managers.	8.42	8.56	8.16
2. Developing alternate organizational structures to overcome the shortcomings of the hierarchy and bureaucratic rules and regulations in the practice of management.	8.13	8.05	8.27
3. Institutionalizing rewards for developing and implementing new ideas and management practices within organizations.	7.70	7.82	7.48

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TABLE II (continued)

Suggestions/Recommendations	Overall Importance Score	Importance Score For Practicing Managers	Importance Score For Academics
4. Developing more and better executive/professor exchange programs.	7.32	7.28	7.39
5. Increasing participation in the decision-making process in the practice of management.	6.97	6.70	7.47
6. Developing cooperative field research programs between management educators and practicing managers.	6.30	6.20	6.49
7. Developing official programs to stimulate creativity and experimentation with management theories in the practice of management.	5.71	5.96	5.25
8. Providing better and more extensive continuing education, management development and supervisory training programs for practicing managers.	5.68	5.66	5.72
9. Providing more practical work experiences for management theorists and educators.	4.94	5.62	3.68

One of the most interesting things about the ideas and ranking shown in Table II is that they represent a mixture of potential solutions to the theory/practice problem that might in many ways be viewed individually as exclusively "practitioner" or "theorist" in orientation - but in which

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there is a substantial collective agreement - with few substantially different "difference scores" and new exceptionally close difference scores.

This suggests again that there is substantial unanimity between practitioners and theorists with respect to potential bridges for the gap - perhaps even greater unanimity than was found in explanations for the problem in Question III of the study.

A careful examination of both tables reveals some very perceptive, thoughtful, and thought provoking explanations for the existence of the theory/practice gap and some very creative and innovative approaches to addressing the problem - ideas and suggestions that interested parties on both sides of the schism might well take note of.

CONCLUSION

Of particular importance in this study is the finding that many of the theory/practice gaps seem to revolve around the singular idea that there are insufficient opportunities for theorists and practitioners to interact and communicate with one another -- the idea that the two camps often live and work in almost mutual exclusivity from one another. That being the case, the gap may well be more a function of perception and context than of content - a mutual misunderstanding born of a lack of exposure to and respect for one another in the face of far too few interactions, communications, and excursions into one another's domains.

That consensus perception on the part of both theorist and practitioner respondents would seem to be born out by the fact that many of the important suggestions given for bridging the gap had to do with simply providing more opportunities for dialogue and interaction between management theorists and management practitioners.

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While the oft worn call for an increase in communication between management theorists and practitioners may, in fact, be over used - in point of fact, this study strongly suggests that such a simple explanation for the theory/practice gap may suffice in large measure and that such elementary solutions may be sufficient. Perhaps exotic explanations and solutions might well give way to such time honored and simple approaches as guest lecturers, field research and projects, functioning advisory boards, co-sponsored conferences, coop programming, executive/professor exchanges, sabbaticals, and the like.

Indeed it appears that the answer to the growing gap between management theory and the practice of management may well lie in developing better communications between the two groups and in the ability of both parties to be creative and innovative in doing so.

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